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FM AMEMBASSY RANGOON
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 4200
INFO RUCNASE/ASEAN MEMBER COLLECTIVE
RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 0690
RUEHRL/AMEMBASSY BERLIN 0140
RUEHBY/AMEMBASSY CANBERRA 9465
RUEHKA/AMEMBASSY DHAKA 4015
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 1494
RUEHMO/AMEMBASSY MOSCOW 0101
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 3192
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS 0380
RUEHRO/AMEMBASSY ROME 0129
RUEHUL/AMEMBASSY SEOUL 6566
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 4176
RUEHCI/AMCONSUL CALCUTTA 0610
RUEHCN/AMCONSUL CHENGDU 0611
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA 2551
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 0208

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 RANGOON 000272

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STATE FOR EAP/MLS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/28/2016

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [BM](#)

SUBJECT: ICRC WON'T GIVE UP ON BURMA

REF: RANGOON 56

RANGOON 00000272 001.6 OF 002

Classified By: Poloff Dean Tidwell for Reasons 1.4 (b, d)

11. (C) SUMMARY: The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) confirmed to international media on February 27 that Burma's ruling regime is now blocking ICRC access to the country's prisons and detention camps. ICRC officials told us on Feb. 28 that they publicly acknowledged their ongoing problems in Burma after Paolo Sergio Pinheiro, Special Rapporteur on Burma to the UN Commission on Human Rights (UNCHR), leaked the issue when releasing his 2006 UNHCR report at a Bangkok press conference last week. The ICRC was trying to negotiate quietly with the regime, but their lack of a clear GOB partner organization makes resolution much harder. The ICRC wants to be "in Burma to stay" and hopes other governments, particularly among Asian nations, can persuade the GOB to again allow the ICRC unhindered access to prisoners. END SUMMARY.

12. (C) Poloff met Patrick Vial (PROTECT), the Head of ICRC's Delegation in Burma, to discuss media reports that ICRC has spoken out publicly on GOB restriction of ICRC access to prisoners. Vial briefed UNSR Paulo Pinheiro in Bangkok on ICRC's difficulties with the GOB, but did not expect Pinheiro to mention it at his press conference. Vial admitted that media have questioned ICRC reps for several weeks about prisoner access issues, but they had persuaded reporters not to publicize the issue yet. When Reuters called after Pinheiro's press conference, Vial decided he could no longer keep the issue under wraps.

13. (C) ICRC began to have trouble accessing prisoners in August 2005. When the GOB began to insist that members of USDA and other government-linked mass member organizations accompany ICRC reps to prisons (reftel), ICRC canceled all prison visits, since privacy of its prisoner access program is a core ICRC tenet. Until August, ICRC coordinated its work

with the Ministry of Home Affairs. ICRC objected when the GOB asked the Ministry of Health to take over as the coordinating ministry, but did not make an official protest. Vial says that neither ministry seems "to know or want to know" who is responsible for coordination. The GOB's sudden move to Pyinmana added new increased obstacles to communication. ICRC's director for Asia-Pacific visited Rangoon in November 2005 and met both the Home Affairs and Health Ministers, but could not resolve the impasse. The Prime Minister was out of town then and remains unwilling to mediate.

¶4. (C) According to Vial, media speculation that ICRC's troubles began with the ouster of former Prime Minister Khin Nyunt further harms ICRC's relationship with the current regime. He also described as unhelpful the National League for Democracy's (NLD) statement that NLD would help supply soap and medicines to prisoners if the ICRC cannot resume its visits. Vial said this makes it appear that ICRC and NLD are partners, and could further alienate the generals. ICRC provided soap to over fifty percent of all prisoners; without ICRC's help, skin infections and disease could spread rapidly in Burma's unsanitary prisons, since authorities do not provide any cleaning supplies or medications to most detainees.

¶5. (C) ICRC has kept its major Western donors informed about its ongoing trials with the GOB, but Vial is hoping that ASEAN and other Asian countries will take the lead in expressing concern over ICRC access to the GOB, stressing how the regime's non-cooperation reflects poorly on the region. As a result of this setback, the ICRC may reduce its expatriate staff further and pare its annual operating budget, but they say that they are in Burma for the long haul and "won't give up easily."

RANGOON 00000272 002.2 OF 002

¶6. (C) COMMENT: After six months, the ICRC's efforts at quiet diplomacy have gone nowhere, and the country's thousands of prisoners are more alone than ever. Public pressure may not restore ICRC access, either, but it provides another stark example of the regime's defiance of international obligations we can raise with countries still sitting on the fence about Burma policy. END COMMENT.
STOLTZ